

Property rights must be protected for our economy to thrive

By Annette Steyn MP – DA Shadow Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development

Chairperson,

Honourable members, this portfolio is holding the future of our country in its hands.

Land reform is an emotive issue, as an issue of justice and restoration. It deals with the emotions of hate, fear and hope. It is the basis of our divided past and one of the main reasons why we don't trust each other. How many times have I heard the words, *"you arrived with the bible in your hand and left with our land?."*

We are all aware that we are sitting on a timebomb and that "the land issue" must be resolved. The Democratic Alliance (DA) supports land reform - but the devil is in the detail. Are we going to follow the path of countries like Zimbabwe and Venezuela, and cause an economic meltdown? Or are we going to surprise the world and heal our divided nation with a land reform program that acknowledges the injustices of the past while we build a future for all South Africans?

The agriculture and land reform portfolios have now been merged as one. This could be a positive move, if we find the correct balance in dealing with all the issues. Both agriculture and land reform are extremely complex and require focused attention.

I would like to propose that we divide our work in three main categories;

Firstly, dealing with these emotive issues in order to give people the opportunity to talk to each other.

I would like to share a discussion with you. I met an elderly gentleman who was given a land reform farm in Limpopo. He is a high ranking and well-known official in MK, and would not like to have his name revealed. I visited the farm, not knowing who I will find, as I like to do oversight and drive around the country, stopping at any farm or smallholding to discuss issues of land and agriculture. The departmental officials know this, because I would take them head on in committee meetings regarding my findings on the ground.

Our discussion started with distrust and a lot of questions from his side. After some time, he decided to tell me his story: I heard about his years in exile and the battles he fought, how he came back to South Africa and started teaching at a school, but his real passion was farming. After a long drawn out process, he was given a land reform farm. On the day of my visit, he was angry and emotional, returning from a meeting with land reform officials.

He had asked for a long-term lease in order to get a loan at the bank, his business plan was approved and all he needed was a lease agreement. I could see the pain and frustration on his face when he told me his lease was not approved, because he was told he is too old. This was after he provided proof that his son would be returning home after getting a degree in agriculture.

I will never forget his words to me. He told the young land reform official, *“you are spitting in my face after I went into battle to fight for the return of our land”!*

He ended off by telling me he is just back from the gravesite of his fallen friend, telling him *“we will never get back our land”*.

It is important that we talk about this, and understand our fears and frustration. After this meeting, I realised why we are sitting with so much hate: we have sent children to war, black and white, and without any healing process we are now expected to all get along just because we changed political leadership.

In this month as we honour the life of our first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela, I remain hopeful that we will find a way. I am however also cautioned by the words attributed to Mahatma Gandhi *“An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind”*.

Secondly, we must agree on the reasons for land reform: Who needs land, what is it for and how will it be divided?

Land transfers have all but stalled in the last few years, was this a deliberate action to manipulate the crises that we are now sitting with?

The need for land, especially for housing, is real and the rate of land invasions must be a concern to everyone.

The Democratic Alliance agrees with the sentiments of former-President Motlanthe; *“if property rights are not protected, you destroy value, and if there is no value in property, you cannot have a thriving economy.”*

Relevant questions and practical proposals for redressing the current situation are already set out in the high level panel report on the assessment of legislation. The proposals in this report need urgent attention.

We must strengthen Parliament’s oversight role over the Department in order to measure progress. We cannot leave it in the hands of the Courts to deal with legislative shortcomings on this important matter.

We must confront corruption in this Department. The well-known Vrede Dairy farm, as well as Mala Mala, are just the tip of the iceberg. The March 2018 SIU report on land reform must be tabled and officials must be held responsible.

A full investigation into political interference into the Land Reform and Agricultural Departments must follow. Like state capture, land capture has crept in while the politically connected have been manipulating the outcomes of many land disputes to their own benefit. We welcome and support the request to investigate CASP funding but this needs to be expanded.

We must get a list of who the current beneficiaries of land reform are, and how it is possible that the political elite are constantly benefitting from the Agricultural Department. How did

a hundred cows make its way to Nkandla and how did the speaker, Miss Modise end up with a pig farm?

Thirdly, agriculture must be a basis for economic growth.

We welcome the plans of the In-Transformation Initiative with the development of an Agricultural Development Agency (ADA). The good work of many farmers, who were pioneers in partnering with black farmers, needs to be expanded on. The role of government should be to support these initiatives and to provide the policy framework for sustained development.

We must also look at the Western Cape model of linking farmers to mentors with a commodity approach. Farming is of a technical nature and needs people with experience to help you succeed.

Lastly chairperson, we must recognise and deal with safety and security of farmers and workers. Thousands of Rands and many hours are spent on security. With the best plans in place, farm attacks and theft of property is a daily reality. Farm attacks are well planned and executed by professionals and will need a coordinated plan to stop it.

Thank you.